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Scott Shepard - Cox Washington Bureau

Friday, June 24, 2005

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Washington --- Democrats demanded an apology Thursday from senior White House adviser Karl Rove for his comments that liberals wanted to respond to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks with "therapy and understanding for our attackers" rather than by preparing for war.

Relatives of victims of the 9/11 attacks issued a statement accusing Rove of using the tragedy "to reap political gain" for the Republican Party.

But the White House defended Rove. Press secretary Scott McClellan said the remarks by the president's top political adviser merely reflected "the different philosophies" of Republicans and Democrats in the war on terrorism.

Asked by reporters whether President Bush would ask Rove to apologize for the remarks, McClellan replied, "Of course not."

The dispute came amid signs of growing discontent among Americans with the conflict in Iraq, the war front the Bush administration opened after overthrowing the Taliban government in Afghanistan in search of 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden.

In a speech Wednesday evening in New York to the state Conservative Party, Rove spoke at length about the comeback of conservatism from the "political wilderness" of four decades ago, culminating in Bush's re-election last fall. In doing so, he argued that "the most difference" between conservatives and liberals was in the area of national security.

"Conservatives saw the savagery of 9/11 and the attacks and prepared for war; liberals saw the savagery of the 9/11 attacks and wanted to prepare indictments and offer therapy and understanding for our attackers," Rove said.

Congressional Democrats --- led by the senators from New York and New Jersey, the two states that lost the most citizens in the 9/11 attacks --- reacted angrily Thursday.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) said, "The one thing New York has had since Sept. 11 is unity, and to inject politics into this and to defame a large number of people is outrageous. It's not what New York and America is all about."

Asked to compare Rove's situation with the Republican-led uproar over recent remarks by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) comparing the U.S. treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to Nazism, Schumer said Durbin "did the right thing" and apologized.

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Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) noted that Rove, the deputy chief of staff, is "not just another political operative" in the Republican Party. "He sits in the White House, a few doors down from the president." She said Bush should insist that Rove apologize.

A letter the Democratic senators sent Rove on Thursday asked that he apologize or retract his statements. At a Capitol Hill news conference, the senators took their demands a step further, saying Bush should force Rove to resign if he does not apologize.

The president should "ask Rove to get out of his office," said Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.).

Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) said Rove had "injected petty partisan politics into one of the most tragic but unifying moments of American history."

Relatives of 9/11 victims posted a statement on their Families of Sept. 11 Web site saying Rove's statements were "not welcome" and his conduct "divisive and ... offensive." They urged Rove "to resist his temptations and stop trying to reap political gain in the tragic misfortunes of others."

McClellan, responding for the president, said Rove "was simply pointing out the differences that exist in how we approach the war on terrorism, and how different people view it in a different way."

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